

REMEMBERING DON MACNEILL



At the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Lepidopterists' Society, held shortly after Don's death, the authors agreed to contribute personal remembrances of Don MacNeill, as a supplement to a more traditional biographical obituary (immediately following these remarks) outlining his contributions to California natural history and the study of Lepidoptera. We solicited contributions from others, with the hope that the resulting article would allow the readership of our society to know something of this generous, knowledgeable, and entertaining lepidopterist and friend. We have not unduly deleted overlap or duplication of experience, both to avoid diluting each contributor's remembrance, and as a means to accent aspects of Don's personality, such as the enjoyment he obviously derived from introducing friends, new to California, to the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

Charles Don MacNeill **1924-2005**

Don MacNeill, an outstanding ecologist, noted hesperiid specialist, patient mentor, and really fine person, died of heart failure on July 28, 2005, at the age of 80. His extensive knowledge, thoughtful reasoning, and friendly nature will be missed by all of us who knew him.

Don was born in San Francisco—a several generation native Californian—and raised in Oakland. As a young boy his interest and dedication to biology was encouraged by Mel Johansen, who was the exhibits preparator at the Snow Museum, a quaint predecessor of the Oakland Museum, where MacNeill eventually spent most of his career. Don's passion was further

fostered by Milford Lundgren, his junior high school biology teacher and ultimately long time friend and collaborating insect collector.

After one semester at the University of California, Davis, Don was drafted into World War II and served in the Air Corps as a radio operator and mechanic with a tow-target squadron, mostly in Hawaii. In March 1945 he married his high school girlfriend, Grace, and after discharge at the end of the war he returned to Davis to major in zoology and wildlife management. However, inspired by a basic course in entomology taught by R. M. Bohart, Don's emphasis abruptly shifted to insects; and he transferred to Berkeley, where the program was more varied (the Department of Entomology was shared by both campuses at that time). He completed a B.S. degree in 1950 and continued in the systematics program in graduate school at Berkeley, under the direction of E. G. Linsley. His thesis involved a biological and taxonomic study of skippers of the genus *Hesperia* in western North America. In addition to field work in the southwestern U.S., Don spent three months in 1952 traveling extensively in Mexico, accompanied by E. E. Gilbert; they collected insects in amber, the type series of *H. uncas gilberti*, and a great many other insects.

Twin daughters, Nora and Daren, were born in 1953 and daughter Linn in 1956. In 1957 MacNeill took a position as assistant curator at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco and continued his thesis research and writing at home evenings, filing the dissertation in 1960. Throughout his tenure in graduate school, at the Academy, and later in his professional career, he served as a mentor to many others. He was

always generous with his time, sharing his knowledge and helping students pursue their interests in natural history. It is tempting to wonder if he missed his calling by not having filled an academic position, but he seemed to excel in a one-on-one role.

Unfortunately for Lepidoptera research but fortunately for a broad audience in natural history, the position at the Academy lacked permanency. So when plans for the new Oakland Museum included hiring curators to develop new concepts in exhibits and public education, Don accepted a position as Associate Curator in 1965, acting as an advisor and planner of the natural history exhibits. Later he became Senior Curator and director of research and planning—the conceptual architect of the museum's California ecology gallery. Rather than the traditional approach, showing large mammals and birds in an African or other exotic diorama, or exhibit cases with rows of butterflies, MacNeill perceived a transect of habitats across California, from seacoast and chaparral foothills through inland valleys and the high Sierra Nevada to the arid Great Basin east of the Sierra. His research and development spanned more than a decade, gradually expanding the exhibits long after the museum was open to the public. Each depicts the ecological relationships of varied organisms—plants, insects, herps, birds, mammals—and their interrelated roles. The exhibits in total form a naturalist's walk across California. Each is based on real places and dynamic events, for example, a decaying log and its inhabitants, the fire-based maintenance of a chaparral habitat, and an alpine lake near Mono Pass at 12,000 ft., the “luncheon meadow” where many of us were coaxed to accompany him during the search for *Hesperia miriamae*. First time visitors to the museum are perhaps puzzled by the lack of names and numbers for the organisms, but the overall effect is innovative, long-lasting, and worth revisiting many times.

Beyond his responsibilities at the Oakland museum, Don worked nights and weekends to complete a monographic treatment of Nearctic Hesperidae, for which he is perhaps best known, published in *The Butterflies of North America*, edited by W. H. Howe. He made several trips to Mexico (Durango-Sinaloa, Nayarit, Jalisco, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon) and the Dominican Republic in search of skippers during the subsequent 20 years, and was a research fellow at the Australian National Collection, C.S.I.R.O., to conduct research on the biology of trapezetine Hesperidae in 1981. He also was a published fern expert and made trips with Alan Smith in search of rare ones, many of which he cultivated. After retirement in 1989, MacNeill continued his research on skippers, especially *Polites*

and *Hylephila*, and carried out field work in the southwestern U.S. and Chile. He used the California Academy as a base, renewing a long term attachment to the CAS collection, usually working there three days a week, despite an increasingly congested commute, until a few weeks before his death. His extensive private collection of Hesperidae has been given to the CAS.

Don MacNeill joined The Lepidopterists' Society in the 1950s, presented a talk on behavior of hesperiids at the first annual meeting of the Pacific Slope Section in 1954, another in 1959 in Santa Barbara, and hosted the 7th Pacific Slope annual meeting at the CAS in 1960 and the 19th at Oakland Museum in 1972. He was a member-at-large of the Executive Council 1966-1969. Don was a member of many ecological and entomological societies and president of The Pacific Coast Entomological Society in 1966, as well as member and a director of advisory boards for various agencies dealing with land resources, the UC Botanical Garden, and so on. But he was not comfortable in large group situations, especially as a speaker, and rarely attended society meetings in his later years—and then only as an adjunct to field work. He attended a few during retirement, as recently as the Pacific Slope meeting in 2002.

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I met Don MacNeill in 1961 at the California Academy of Sciences where I had been hired as a temporary employee. My job was to transfer beetles from wooden boxes to the academy drawers. I found the pull of butterflies to be much greater than that of the beetles. So, I spent as much time with Don as I could. We formed a friendship that lasted forty-three years. When weather permitted we would spend our lunch time visiting the San Bruno Mountains, Twin Peaks, or some other interesting place. Don was always willing to be helpful in answering my questions. His willingness went as far as letting me car pool to work from his home. During those trips we had many discussions of butterflies, future collecting trips, and how we would solve the problems of the world. During this time I met his wife Grace, and his three daughters, as well as admiring his collection and laboratory that sat over the garage.

I will always remember the good times we had on the trips to the Mojave Desert and the long hikes to Mono Pass for *Hesperia miriamae*. It was during one of these trips that I met Don's junior high school teacher and long time friend Milford Lundgren.

When Don moved to the Oakland Museum in 1965, I lost contact with him and it was not until after he retired